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Women and Religion

in Ancient Egypt

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Abstract

Much evidence from throughout the pharaonic period demonstrates that women actively participated in the religious life of ancient Egypt. Titles survive both on monuments of females and in private letters which indicate cultic activity, although these unfortunately give us almost no details about actual cultic responsibilities. Religious activities of unmarried women, middle class housewives, and royal family members are documented, but women's opportunities for active leadership roles in the cult varied over the long history of ancient Egypt and also from cult to cult. We will proceed chronologically because, when dealing with over two thousand years of source material and its obvious recording of changes and developments, it seems inappropriate to do otherwise. Section headings are as follows: Women in the Old Kingdom Cults,

Evidence from the Middle Kingdom, Women and Religion in the New Kingdom, Late New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period Religious Women, Economic Power of the Priesthood, Royalty's Role, Private Cults and Personal Religion, and New Cultic Roles for Women in the First Millennium, followed by a brief bibliography.

Women in the Old Kingdom Cults

There was no separation of Temple and State in ancient Egypt-the king was regarded as high priest of all the gods and the temples were built and endowed by his government. Temples, at least by the second millennium, were, to quote B.J. Kemp, "substantial institutions of a semi-independent nature. They possessed large estates, and their crops helped the government pay its workers. (see Kemp, 1990, 193). Thus there was a reciprocity here that we who know only secular democracies tend to misunderstand. Also when some British scholars discount public roles for the women of ancient Egypt by trivializing the significance of women's participation in temple cults, they are perhaps writing with a bias influenced by the present age where church attendance is extremely low in western Europe and established religion has lost much of its power and prestige. Ancient Egypt was by contrast the extreme opposite of a secular society. All life revolved around religion. The year was liberally peppered with holy feast days and religion and magic dominated science, medicine, literature, and the economy at large. Because temples were housing for deities and not places of worship for the masses, who appear to have had limited access to the holy domain, those who served the deities inside the temples were special people who were more likely to be willing to meet certain standards of behavior and follow rules of purity. Only a few Egyptians entered the major temples, and could come into the presence of the deity. The mass of the people had to content themselves with leaving petitions and votives or saying prayers at the outside walls of the temple, where the image of a resident deity "who hears prayers" was sometimes supplied. Selected members of the public, probably mainly officials, might assemble in the open courtyards-- outside of the temple proper, but at least within its protective surrounding walls--on special occasions, such as when the royal family visited for important

festivals. Normally, however, the walls served to protect and preserve the purity and sanctity of the divine sphere from the pollution of the human world. Thus those who in any way entered the sanctuary and came into the presence of the deity enjoyed special status among the Egyptians, if not now among some Egyptologists.

The first priestesses known were members of the royal family that built the great pyramids of the Fourth Dynasty (2625-2510 B.C.). Queens served as priestesses for the cults of major goddesses like Neith and Hathor (a creator and a solar goddess respectively) and some gods--Thoth (wisdom and the moon) and Wepwawet (a funerary deity) among them. The wife of King Khafre, Queen Meresankh, was a priestess of the god Thoth and her mother Queen Hetepheres was a Prophet of King Khufu: officiating in the mortuary cult of the predecessor of her husband King Radedef in what may well have been the largest temple of her era. The tombs of principle royal wives (the mother of the heir) reveal that the ladies shared with the king the exclusive rights to pyramid tombs, solar boats, and funerary literature which would propel them into the company of the great gods in the sky after death. Thus the principle queen shared divine status, above and beyond the status of her sons and daughters and the other royal wives who were not destined to rule and whose sons never became king.

Betsy Bryan (*Oxford History*, 1999, 228) has pointed out that the daughters of Egyptian kings were not willingly given in marriage and would seem to have been very much partners of their fathers, fulfilling religious roles if not political ones. This seems to be a consistent feature throughout the first two millennia of pharaonic history.

As to people not of the royal family, by the later Old Kingdom private individuals are found more widely positioned in government and the temples. A monument in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art reveals that already in the Old Kingdom a woman Chantress of Upper Egypt addressed the king directly as she participated in the important *heb sed* or royal jubilee and thus a national religious celebration. In the private sphere, both men and women could be employed as *ka*-servants, looking

after the memorial cults of the deceased elite who left endowments that would support the maintenance of their tombs and their perpetual offerings. Such cemetery officials poured libations, made offerings and recited the proper formulas during these procedures (Blackman, 1921, 26).

The Old Kingdom has left us numerous statues of women, often paired with their husband but frequently carved individually (especially when in wood). These and the so-called false doors and actual door jambs and lintels from family tombs reveal titles held by common-born women in the cults some appearing as prophets for the cults of Thoth, Khons, Wepwawet and the creator god Ptah. But the most popular deity for them was the goddess Hathor, consort of Re the sungod and at the same time regarded as the divine mother of the king of Egypt. In the beginning, Hathor's priesthood was predominately female and her cult places were scattered throughout the land. (There were women in other cults in the Old Kingdom, but the cult of Hathor has been the most thoroughly examined and appears to have the most popular.)

Marianne Galvin's doctoral dissertation (1981) collected and investigated the monuments of hundreds of women of the Old Kingdom's Fifth and Sixth dynasties who were attached to the cult of Hathor. These women were truly priestesses, with the title of *hemet ntjer*. Galvin traced the burgeoning and decline of female leadership over a span of some 500 years. She discovered that some women served as priestesses in more than one Hathoric temple and clearly the female clergy of Hathor represented a greater cross-section of society than is suggested by the records for other cults. Positions in the clergy were not handed down from mother to daughter, but connections between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law are apparent (Galvin, 1984) suggesting that their temple activity led to bonding between women of different generations and gave opportunities for match-making by the older women in the group (Lesko, 1996, 38). Clearly, religious life gave women a chance to move outside of their homes and bond with other women. Temple service also provided an income for some women. It was within the temple too that certain women came to have authority over others in their peer

group. Some priestesses of Hathor bore the title of *Meret*, which is a title for women attested from earliest times and throughout most of the Old Kingdom period (Blackman, 1921, 8). They appear to have sung welcomes to the king in royal celebrations, and also welcomed by song the sun in the temple's daily service.

As Hathor was a solar goddess, it is not surprising to find her cult at the sun-temple of King Neferirkare of the Fifth Dynasty where a priest and priestess of Hathor were married to each other. The queen Khentkawes, who was a regent for an underaged son at the end of the Fifth Dynasty, was also a Prophet of Hathor. Royalty was always importantly involved with the cult, and queens would remain as chief officiants in the Hathor cult and, indeed, living incarnations of this preeminent goddess for centuries to come.

During the late Old Kingdom, men suddenly appear among the records of Hathoric clergy, especially in a leadership role as Overseer of Prophets of Hathor, although this may have been an administrative rather than cultic position. Certainly it would have been an advantage to enlist literate people to oversee the income and outlays of these endowed temple establishments. Due to the demands of life in a pre-industrial society, female children (and most males) were taught practical skills while only a small percentage of male children were literate to the extent of being able to write and to keep accounts and other records for important establishments. The whole question of literacy and learning needs to be examined more closely. It was easier to learn to read than to write or compose, and too many ordinary household items survive with written labels from ancient Egypt to lead me to believe women in charge of elite households were totally illiterate. However, the arduous tasks of producing cloth and food were of first priority in the education of a woman and the amount of literacy would doubtless have been minimal in most cases, as it was for men.

Evidence from the Middle Kingdom

While prophets were full-time clerics, there were also lay women with the rank of a *wabet* or "pure one" who served in the temple for one month at intervals spaced through the year and apparently received the same payment for their services as did the men of this category. This is clear already from the Fifth Dynasty papyri found at Abusir from an archive of the king Neferirkar Kakai's pyramid (Doxey, 2001, 3, 71). Female *wab*-priestesses are known from at least two Middle Kingdom stelae, and from the second half of the Middle Kingdom's Twelfth Dynasty (circa 1700 B.C. E.) a letter survives from one Irer, a house mistress who also had a job outside her home as a supervisor of a state weaving studio. In it she states that she had to take a month's leave of absence in order to fulfill her temple duty (Wente, 1990, #101 P. Kahun, III.3).

Cults and Clergy

There are records of female prophets (true priests) in the cult temples at both Abydos and Beni Hasan (Fischer, 1982, 1101) and elite women are still found as priestesses in the important state cult of Hathor in the first half of the Middle Kingdom (c. 1900 B.C.E.). The burials of a number who were prophets in her cult are situated within the temple precinct surrounding the burial place of their husband King Mentuhotep II of the Eleventh Dynasty at Deir el-Bahari (west bank at Luxor). In the same general area, a lady named Senet, who was the mother of a prime minister or vizier of Senwosret II of the Twelfth Dynasty, had her own tomb. Inscriptions tell us that she was an "honored lady and Prophet of Hathor." Possibly due to his fall from royal favor, the images of Senet's son were removed from the walls of this tomb and it was completely appropriated by Senet. She also had a large statue created of herself for her funerary cult (Davies, 1920, plates XXXVIII and XXXIX). Wall scenes in her tomb depict singers, musicians and dancers, both men and women, exuberantly invoking the goddess Hathor as they welcome Senet's funeral cortege to the cemetery.

It is obvious that Senet felt she could pass into the other world on her own recognizance and actually this is what the Coffin Texts, the mortuary literature of the time, ensured women too. There does not seem much logic to claims made by some that women did not have tombs (recently several more tombs totally devoted to women have been excavated in various parts of Egypt) or that wives were present in tombs only to ensure the rebirth of their husbands in the afterlife, as suggested by Ann M. Roth (1999, 51). Indeed, funerary texts and ushebti belonging to women strongly suggest that women's roles and expectations beyond the grave did not vary from men's. Indeed, there has been recent speculation (for example, Meskell, 1999) on archaeological remains that need not have been indulged in had the proponents been more familiar with ancient Egyptian religious as well as secular texts.

Women with the important priestly title "God's Wife" are known for the cults of Min, Amun, and Ptah from the Middle Kingdom, but at the present time the position and its duties cannot be elaborated upon. The title did not die out, however, and became significant in later dynasties (see below).

R. Gillam's research (1995) demonstrated that non-royal women did not hold on to major cultic roles throughout the Middle Kingdom, but eventually lost out to men. Three generations of the family of governors of the province of Kusae in Middle Egypt were leaders in the local Hathor temple, with the governor being an overseer of prophets and women of his family active in the cult, but not taking leadership roles. It should be noted that during the second half of the Twelfth Dynasty the independence and power of the regional governing families was squelched by the king. In losing political power, the leading men of the province may well have found religion the only area in which to exert some influence and gain financially as well.

Now, among women, it would seem that only royal women remained as chief officiants in Hathor's cult and possibly a number of other cults too, particularly those connected with the fertility of Egypt. A Middle Kingdom temple relief, from the Fayum, shows King Amenemhet III and

his young daughter officiating at the cult of Renenutet, the prominent cobra goddess of the harvest (Troy, 1986, 86). The royal female's role of transmitting offerings to this goddess in return for the generous Egyptian harvest may have gone back to prehistoric times. World-wide there are serpent associations with the earliest goddess cults and their priestesses, who should have been adept at handling serpents (B. Lesko, 1999, 69). The Egyptian queen or royal daughter may have been regarded as the natural mediator between her people's need for a good harvest and the divinity who could bring it. This princess is the first royal woman depicted shaking a sistrum, the cultic musical instrument usually associated with Hathor but in fact used more widely. (B. Lesko, 1999, 100 and 146). The tie-in between the royal daughter and the nation's fertility may be the message behind the gigantic statue of one of Ramses II's daughters erected in a temple in Akhmim, home of Min the god of fertility. This was discovered and re-erected a few years ago (Hawass, 2000, 189). Scholars have suggested that the prominence of princesses in temple scenes (and the lack of princes' portrayals) and also the lack of documentation of marriages for 18th dynasty princesses, suggests their dedication to religious roles and their importance for the continued fertility of the land of Egypt.

Musicians

Even though the title *shmoy.t* is not encountered often in Middle Kingdom texts, there are numerous portrayals of groups of women who served as members of the temple's *heneret*, or troop of sacred musicians. This term had traditionally been translated as "harem" but these singers, musicians and dancers originally belonged to goddess cults (Bat, Isis, Nekhbet, Bast and Hathor), and only later appeared as celebrants in the cults of gods too, like Horus and Onuris and are portrayed in tomb wall scenes as integral parts of funerals as early as the Sixth Dynasty. From the Middle Kingdom on, instruments that would remain integral parts of the service, particularly in the hands of women, are known. These are the *menat* necklace, made up principally of numerous strands of tiny faience beads which created a rustling sound when shaken, and the sistrum, a rattle, usually metallic, whose loose cross bars created a tinkling sound.

Also heard were the clapping of hands, snapping of fingers and clattering together of ivory wands which would have accompanied the chants of the celebrators. In later centuries tambourines, harps and double pipes are shown played by women in religious contexts.

Women and the Rituals of Birth

The process of birth was one of concern, naturally, with a high maternal as well as infant mortality rate. Female midwives doubtless used sacred amulets and magical spells to protect the expectant mother. Curved ivory wands, engraved with the friendly demons associated with the protection of mothers and babes were utilized during this crucial time, but exactly how is not known. Birth took place within a temporary structure, possibly placed on the roof of a house, decorated with vines associated with fertility (Friedman, 1994, 102). The numerous figurines of the household deities Bes (the bandy-legged dwarf god and Taweret, the pregnant hippo goddess) were probably owned by every woman. The ugliness of these images may have been meant to frighten off the demons who could threaten at this crucial time. However, these two deities were probably always welcome in the home as perpetual protectors of the family. The image of Bes, especially, is found adorning all types of domestic artifacts: cosmetic implements to furniture. Excavated town sites have shown that houses contained altars, usually wall niches, in which might sit a generic bust of an "ancestor" (known from the New Kingdom) or pottery figurines of a woman on a bed, as well as images of these household deities. A sketch from Deir el-Medina shows a woman maintaining the family cult at this domestic altar (Friedman, 1994, fig. 11).

Women at Funerals

Most museum collections contain small statuettes of Isis and her sister Nephthys in attitudes of wailing. These were set beside the coffin of the deceased. In actual funerals, real women would act the role of the two "kites" as the divine sisters of Osiris were known in this role. The deceased Egyptian, whether female or male, was known as an "Osiris"

identifying them with the Lord of the Dead, at least if they were deemed worthy of passing the tribunal of Osiris's court. But the goddess Hathor too had a role at funerals, as the deity who welcomed the deceased into the West, which was her realm as well. Because of their connection with Hathor--whose responsibilities included assisting the deceased in their regeneration --the funeral rites in the cemetery were attended by the cult personnel of Hathor and featured acrobatic bare-breasted women in short skirts portrayed in what seem highly ecstatic dances. Tomb scenes, going back as far as the Old Kingdom's Fifth Dynasty illustrate this already, and those of the Middle Kingdom show more fully clothed women clapping accompaniment and singing. These exuberant performers are placed in front of the tomb or in the funeral procession in order, perhaps, to celebrate the sexuality which was required for the regeneration and rebirth of the deceased in the next world. Throughout most of Egyptian history, both men and women are found together in such sacred troops, but when found in temples, the *heneret* was usually made up of women and their "chief" was usually married to the high priest of the temple.

The funerary literature that once was reserved for royalty became, around the end of the third millennium B.C.E., the prerogative of commoners too, and now ordinary women as well as men might own, if they could afford them or were given them by patrons, the necessary offering tables, stelae, and coffins with religious spells that could aid them in attaining eternal life beyond the grave. Votive and funerary stelae of the Middle Kingdom portray both men and women seated at tables covered with food and drink and are inscribed with an invocation meant to magically perpetuate the offerings of a thousand each of bread, beer, oxen, and fowl. Some stelae were dedicated by women in honor of their female family members to help them receive the blessings of deities and perpetual offerings in the Beyond. William A. Ward pointed out that even some very humble women in the Middle Kingdom were able to own such funerary paraphernalia (Ward, 1989, 34)

Usually an eldest son officiated at the funerals of his parents, but if none existed a daughter could do this as well. Both male and female *ka*-

servants were hired to look after the mortuary cults of the deceased elite, pouring libations, making offerings, and reciting the proper prayers that would ensure the continuance of sustenance for the deceased in the next world (Fisher, 2000, 8-9) There are, throughout the second millennium B.C., many tomb scenes depicting groups of what may be professional wailing women at elite funerals, but both male and female relatives of the deceased brought floral bouquets and participated in final rites at the cemetery. The professional preparation of a mummy seems to have been a career for men and texts so far recovered reveal non-professional preparation of a body for burial to have been undertaken by men as well.

Women and Religion in the New Kingdom

The second half of the Second Millennium B.C., the Egyptian Empire Period (New Kingdom), yields a large number of private monuments on which the title of *shmoy.t* (chantress) and *hesy.t* (musician) often follows a lady's title of House Mistress. Elite, but non-royal, women are often portrayed, in tomb wall paintings or statues, holding the *menat* necklace and sistrum rattle associated with Hathoric rituals. Indeed, there is more evidence in the New Kingdom for the use of these instruments among commoners with priestly duties than among royal women and the number of women involved in temple cults rose consistently throughout the Eighteenth Dynasty, culminating with the reign of Amenhotep III to be resumed again, quite possibly with more participation, during the following Nineteenth Dynasty.

Another rank of an important, but non-royal, priestess who appears in relief scenes at Karnak temple from the female pharaoh Hatshepsut's reign is called a *henu.t* (spelled in hieroglyphs with a different h than the word *hener*) who had a male counterpart called a *henu*. They are shown together consecrating food offerings and burning the names of enemies of the state over a brazier. The *henu.t* also leads the prophets into the purification tank, presumably before entering into the presence of the god. Anyone present during sacred rites would have to be so purified. Whether male or female, all body hair was shorn and bathing and the

rinsing of the mouth with salt water were required for the purification of the officiants.

The lay- woman's religious rank--chantress of a god, for instance--apparently expressed prestige and was for this reason very important to acknowledge and record. If a woman bore such a title it frequently was recorded on whatever monument she left behind and was also--and this would seem most telling--used in addressing her even if her correspondant was a close relative, such as her husband or son. Because temples were off-limits to the average person in ancient Egypt, the temple personnel, or servants of the resident deity, were the only ones allowed within the sacred house. The laity who would bring votive offerings and petitions might be allowed in the front outdoor courtyard, but no further. Thus anyone with intimate contact with the deity was a specially privileged person. This fact was not lost on earlier Egyptologists who frequently used the term "priestess" for the chantresses or members of the *henerets* or musical troops which took part in temple and tomb rites. In the New Kingdom the gods known to have had *henerets* were the male deities Amun, Montu, Khons, Thoth, Min, Sobek and the deified king Amenhotep I, but also the goddesses Isis, Bast and Nekhbet as well as Hathor. Thus it would seem more logical to define the word as meaning a troop of sacred entertainers for the divinity rather than use the word "harem," as has too often been done, for this term is so heavy with sexual connotations. At major temples, the chief of the *heneret* was often the wife of the high priest. One such woman from the reign of Ramses II served as the Chief of the *Heneret* of Amun at Karnak temple, coming there from a similar position at the temple of Hathor at Dendera when her husband left the Hathor cult there to assume responsibility for the Amun cult at Thebes (Kitchen, 2000, 203). The women musicians stood by as the prophet approached the god for the daily service which consisted of wakening, purifying, dressing and feeding the deity housed in the temple. The rattling of sistra by the temple's women may have been heard between phrases of the recital by those entoning a liturgy. The female singers obviously must have sung sacred hymns, others presented floral bouquets:

"The maidens rejoice for you with garlands; the women with the wreath crown" (Darnel, 1995,57).

The rhythmic percussion music, chanting, and the burning of incense were meant to awaken the god. Today all this is still part of the Egyptian Coptic Church's services.

In a well-documented village of civil servants and craftsmen (the archaeological site of Deir el-Medina), only the wives of the most highly placed men seem to have served in the local temples as chantresses or singers. Less than half of the recorded tombs at the site contain female religious titles and of these all but one of the women are related to scribes, foremen, or draftsmen (i.e. literate men in the most responsible positions). These were "elite" women in the context of this town, but not in the greater society, as they seem to be "middle class" in wealth and status. Thus these women may have been attached only to the local shrines of their humble community. It is at Deir el-Medina that the prestige connected with their rank in that community is indicated by the fact that even these women's own husbands and sons addressed letters to them using their cultic titles (Wente, 1990 and Lesko, 1999). Interestingly, a few of the women were associated with cults of deities not known from their community, but from far to the south at Aswan. This may indicate that these women held positions in temples in other areas before moving to the artist colony but retained their former titles due to their prestige.

The singers of Hathor seem to have impersonated that goddess and the *heneret* of Amun-Re also did so, as they participated in the great national festivals, like the Feast of the Valley. This was a colorful and very popular holy festival that saw the fleet of sacred boats containing the shrines of the gods of Karnak cross the Nile and the proceed across the west bank to the necropolis (the boat shaped shrines now carried on poles by many male priests) to the Valley of the Mistress of the West. The populace accompanied this sacred parade and spent the night among the graves and tombs of their family members (picknicking with food and drink). In a state of enebriation, the families once again communicated

with their departed loved ones. The women of Hathor's cult went among the encampments of families shaking their sistra and announcing the presence of the great goddess Hathor, the welcomer and comforter of the worthy dead (Davies and Gardiner, 1915, 96).

While the common folk were kept outside the temples they still participated in festivals at which the distribution of food and drink took place and maintained their own practices of what may be called "folk religion." As B. Watterson has pointed out, in most cultures formal religion is in the control of men but women find their own traditions and practices (Watterson, 1991, 244). In Egypt the elite, both men and women, participated in the temple rituals but ordinary men and women had their "less sophisticated grassroots cults" and left votives at shrines, maintained household cults, and kept vigils at the graves of family members. Often, it has been often pointed out that far fewer women owned tombs of their own and fewer have their own stelae associated with their "effective spirit" cult after death. However, if family tombs accommodated female relatives this only shows the closeness of the Egyptian family and the fact that more wealth was in the hands of the male head of the family. There are numerous fine coffins of women, female ushebtis, and a number of statues and stelae that survive from the Old through New Kingdoms. However, in such a time most men survived their first wives and went on to marry again. This may have well have occasioned a conservative outlay of funds on the burials of first wives by husbands who were themselves usually still young. The finer funeral arrangements probably belonged to people who survived longer and had become prosperous with career advancements or their own industry over the years.

The Ramesside Age (Dynasties Nineteen and Twenty, circa 1290-1070 B.C.E.) saw the humanization of the pharaoh and the ascendance to supreme power of the great state gods Ptah of Memphis, Re-Harakhty of Heliopolis, and particularly of Amun-Re of Thebes. By the Twentieth Dynasty he had become regarded as the universal and transcendent god. If Amun had no rival, neither did his priesthood.

At the great Karnak temple, Amun-Re's chief temple and home, the wife of the First or Second Prophet (highest priests in the hierarchy) could hold a position as chief of the women of the temple. Egyptologists have collectively referred to these religious women mistakenly as "concubines of the god," perhaps because one of Amun's forms was as a fertility god and when in this role he was portrayed as ithyphallic. The term "concubine" apparently was deemed suitable for the female temple staff whose role, it was speculated, could have been one that ensured, through their music and dancing, the heightened state of sexuality (and thus fertility) in the resident god. However, there is no difference in the writing of the word *heneret*, whether it appears in the context of a funeral, a goddess cult, or a god's cult. Thus it is the imagination of the scholar rather than the evidence of the ancient inscriptions that have led to this misleading translation. That the term is still translated in this way despite the well-known article by D. Nord (1981) is remarkable.

At Karnak there was also a position, that can be traced back to the early Eighteenth Dynasty, of Divine Votaress, that was sometimes held by a daughter of the High Priest of Amun and sometimes by a royal woman (the records are exceedingly sparse, unfortunately). It would thus seem more prestigious than the previously named posts, while a still higher rank, that of the God's Wife of Amun, was often held in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasty by a woman of the royal family. This position will be discussed below in the section on royalty's role in the religious life.

The well-decorated tombs of the civil servant community that was responsible for producing the royal tombs of the Ramesside Age depict the tomb owner and his wife in the presence of the greatest gods, face to face with divinity. Many fine, stelae and elaborately decorated coffins of the men and women of this community have survived, and on both tomb walls and stelae several generations of family members of both sexes are commemorated..

Late New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period Religious Women

Monuments have not survived that would tell us details about the role of the Votaress in the Domain of Amun of thebes, nor indeed even her identity. The Votaress is, in the Twentieth Dynasty, recorded as having a portion of the grain tax allotted to her by the government and as having her own stewards and scribes (Wente, 1999, #156). She also had a group of subordinate religious women in her retinue. It is quite possible that this woman was a member of the royal family, if not a queen herself. A papyrus of the late Twentieth Dynasty records the presence of four group tombs in Western Thebes for these women (Peet, 1930,39), tombs dating back in time to the previous dynasty it would seem, but these are tombs that have not been found (or at least identified) as yet.

This unusual situation of women being buried with other women rather than with a spouse or parent raises the question of whether some women entered religious life and dedicated themselves to a life revolving on the temple and not around their own family. Because Egyptian society placed no great emphasis or importance on virginity, indeed no clear word for it existed at this time, and because sexual activity was considered normal and good for society, there is no certainty that any women with temple careers had to remain virginal in ancient Egypt. At the very least, however, the separate burials of such women in the royal necropolis would seem to suggest their full-time involvement with the divine service.

Just like a queen, the Divine Votaress had her own administrative staff and the chief servant in socio-economic matters was her steward. When the government set about to investigate allegations of royal tomb robberies in the Twentieth Dynasty at Thebes, one of the government officials on the commission was the steward of the Divine Votaress, surely indicating a great deal of influence of the lady in that vicinity. Because there was no strict division between temple and state in ancient Egypt and the Theban area was an important religious center with many temples dedicated to its Divine Triad, Amun, Mut and Khonsu, it might be considered something like a Vatican City at this time. It is natural that

high clerics of the area would be concerned for the security of both temples and tombs of the royal family. The payment of the necropolis workers seems to have been overseen by the Theban temple establishment already during the reign of Ramses IV and, again, the Divine Votaress is the person who stepped in to see that rations were delivered to the workers when these deliveries had fallen into arrears.

Other documents show the Votaress, who is not usually named but is called the Noble Lady (a king would not be named in such letters usually either) getting involved in political decisions of a nefarious kind. Letters exist from the 21st Dynasty which implicate the noble lady Nodjme, who was the Principal of the *Heneret* of Amun-Re, in a plot with a general (either Piankh or Herihor, her husband) to kill two troublesome policemen (Wente, 1990, # 34 & 35).

Usually the wife of the Sem-Priest or Chief Prophet of a temple was the leader or Great One of the *Heneret* of his temple. These women, organized and led the musical contingent in temple services in the presence of the deity, but they, at least occasionally, helped administer the temple as well, receiving and disbursing commodities, particularly those destined for the sacrificial altar. This is shown by a lengthy letter from a Chantress, who would presumably not even have enjoyed as high prestige as her contemporary, the Noble Lady, but who had real responsibilities for provisioning the god of her temple. Dating to the Twentieth Dynasty, this document has been published in English translation by Edward Wente (1990, #290). In it the Chantress of Amun, Henuttowy describes to the Scribe of the Necropolis her concerns about carrying out her assignment of receiving grain rations and her worries about not having adequate amounts for the divine altar at what seems to be the cult temple of Ramses III on the West Bank. Rather significantly, she indicates she was the recipient of letters from various state officials, including the highest, the vizier. Another Chantress, Mutemope, received a letter from the Scribe of the Necropolis and she seems to have been a co-administrator of a temple with him (Haring, 1997, 236) It may be that a woman would not have been given such a responsibility unless she was married to a priest or official, but it is still important to note that women

were allowed important responsibilities and had authority over male workers as well. Indeed the language used by one in a surviving letter to a troop commander is quite stern in tone (Lesko, 1999, 250). Here is a good example of a woman working in an administration that was every bit as important in ancient Egypt as a civil administration would have been. Only a small percentage of private letters have survived from pharaonic Egypt and those mostly have been found in Upper Egypt, far from the great urban centers of Memphis, Heliopolis, and the royal residences in the Delta. Thus it is impossible to know how many other women would have been given administrative duties like these Theban women, but it should not be ruled out as something never done.

Returning to the position of Sem-priest, which has been described by Haring as the highest rank in the theocracy, by the reign of Ramses V of the Twentieth Dynasty there is even a documented Sem-priestess (Haring, 1997, 459). Her name was Djed-mw.t-iw-s-ankh and her coffin is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. It is unfortunate that Haring, whose book on Divine Households in the memorial temples of the New Kingdom on the west bank at Thebes would seem the logical place for greater attention to the female personnel, has given only the slightest attention to the records of women involved with cults and lists but a small portion of the chantresses known from published documents.

This indication of highest cultic status for a woman is probably similar to that enjoyed by the Divine Votaress and would be followed in the next dynasties of the Third Intermediate Period (1069 - 664 B.C.E.) by women assuming pontifical posts at a variety of temples. The first wife (later divorced) and the second wife of Pinudjem I held titles such as Prophetess of Mut in Karnak, Prophetess of Khonsu (the goddess Mut's son) in Karnak, Prophetess of Onuris-Shu, Prophetess of Min, Horus and Isis in Apu, prophetess of the primeval goddess Nekhbet of Nekheb (el-Kab) and Prophetess of Osiris, Horus, and Isis in Abydos (Troy, 1986, 174; Naguib, 1988, 275-277). Such female priestly titles are not known from the preceding dynasties, so it is a mystery whether or not such ranks existed earlier. One must remember that only a tiny percentage of the written documents and very few monuments even, have survived from

before 1000 B.C. It has been suggested (Niwinski, 1988, 226-30) that the wife of the high priest at Karnak thus paralleled her husband's authority by being chief of the entire Upper Egyptian female temple personnel. However, such a superior position could have been conveyed by using the older "Chief of the Heneret" title for each deity, and the use of "prophet" would seem to add responsibilities and prestige and perhaps even monetary rewards, not known previously. The greater number of documents and monuments surviving from the later dynasties may be revealing examples of cultic roles that seem to appear for the first time but may actually have existed earlier, but for which the evidence has not been found. Meanwhile Leonard H. Lesko has discovered evidence suggesting the female hand in the editing and copying out of lengthy manuscripts of the Book of the Dead which belonged to the family of the High Priest Pinudjem in the 21st dynasty (L.H. Lesko, 1994). It is not surprising that daughters of well educated and elite men would have themselves received an education. This has been suggested already for elite women of the Eighteenth Dynasty, and surely wealthy women would have had the leisure time to devote to studies if they were interested.

Economic Power of the Priesthood

Although the documentation is sporadic, even the Old Kingdom, remote in time as it is, yields some evidence for the compensation of those who served cults. A family of prophets who lived in the Fifth Dynasty had a daughter who received equal shares with her brothers of any donations made to the temple with which they were associated. She also was granted five arouras of land for exercising her duties in the temple. Another prophetess is recorded as receiving a one-hundredth share of the income of the temple of Khons, just like the rest of the priests attached to it. (Blackman, 1921, 29). Records from both the Old Kingdom and Middle Kingdom show *wab*-priestesses in the cult of Hathor receiving the same payment for her services as did the males (Fischer, 1982, 1101). This was the lowest ranking of the clergy: those grouped into phyles that served in rotation for a month at a time.

Better documentation exists for later periods. The growing professionalization of the priesthood in the New Kingdom positioned literate men at the top of the hierarchy, but, as we have seen, their wives and daughters are often found also playing important supportive roles in the same temple. In this way priestly families became entrenched, intermarried, and controlled much of the wealth of the kingdom which was bestowed generously by the pharaohs upon the gods.

The men who became priests did not necessarily enter temple life after years of study of theology, but rather had proved themselves useful and loyal bureaucrats. Indeed, many priests of the second half of the Eighteenth Dynasty and subsequent Nineteenth and Twentieth came from military backgrounds (A. Kadry, 1982, 42-46). It is obvious that the king was attempting to control the priesthood by placing men he felt he could trust in the positions that headed up large staffs of workers, controlled considerable real estate, and collected tax revenues. The wealth and influence of the temples of the New Kingdom was phenomenal, and it was the priesthood that, through the reversion of offerings, enjoyed the bounteous food offerings and gained considerable purchasing power. Temple wall scenes indicate that all manner of fruits and vegetables and meat made up the great hecatombs offered to the gods. However, grain and linen cloth also was offered and these were the main staples of this bartering, pre-coinage economy. After the gods had accepted or "consumed" the offerings, the commodities went to the priests for enjoyment or distribution. Because linen and grain were used in this barter economy in lieu of coinage the god's wealth became the priests' purchasing power.

By the Twentieth Dynasty it has been shown that a third of the cultivable land in Egypt was controlled by the temples. Of all the cults, that of Amun Re King of the Gods was the mightiest, owning three-quarters of the divine real estate. From the reign of Ramses III of the Twentieth Dynasty comes a lengthy papyrus (P. Harris I) which details the king's grants to temples throughout the land but primarily it is three major temples in Heliopolis, Memphis and Thebes, which received the land, personnel, precious metals, livestock, ships, and various

commodities. Land holdings reached over 74,000 acres and it has been calculated that close to eight tons of gold was turned over to temple treasuries. The wealthiest temple of all would seem to be the seat of Amun of Thebes, Karnak, which is the best documented of institutions in terms of economic power and priestly personnel. At the end of the Twentieth Dynasty, when a floundering economy and internal insecurity made Thebans desperate, it is recorded that even priests began stripping the royal temples of long dead kings on the West Bank of their precious metals, copper and gold, which had adorned doors and walls (P. British Museum 10053).

Better times were to come, however. The ruler who came out of the Delta city of Sais in the wake of the Assyrian invasion, Psamtek, was determined to rebuild Egypt's economy as well as independence. That he succeeded admirably was noted by Herodotus (II, 177,1) and is also evidenced by the great wealth of the dowry which the Saitic pharaoh Psamtek sent with his daughter to Thebes (with a flotilla of boats to carry it), upon her adoption into the leadership of Karnak temple (Caminos, 1964). In her role of the God's Wife the princess was given a stipend of 3300 arouras of land scattered about in seven province of the country plus portions of the offerings totaling vast amounts. It is clear from the documentation of this time (7th Century B.C.E.) that even the wives of the prophets at Karnak received stipends, probably because they too played a role in the rituals of the temple.

Records from the Ptolemaic Period (last three centuries B.C.E.) such as the Decree of Canopus grant the wives of priests a daily allowance of loaves of bread but also direct that the daughters of priests, from the day of their birth, are entitled to rations derived from temple endowments (Blackman, 1921, 30).

Royalty's Role

As we have seen, an important female member of the priesthood was the God's Wife. She served the cult of the gods Amun of Thebes and Min of Akhmim already in the Middle Kingdom. This period was followed by a

long Second Intermediate Period, a time of political fragmentation of the country with the northern half under foreign dynasts. The Eighteenth Dynasty, which reunited the country under a strong centralized government, resurrected this God's Wife position for the queen who functioned at Karnak, in what became the greatest temple of the land, the home of Amun-Re in his new role as King of the Gods. The position was probably held first by the pharaoh Ahmose's strong queen, Ahmose-Nefertari, whose gigantic coffin and later deification give us an indication of an unusually high standing in the land. A badly broken text, the so-called Donation Stela, has been interpreted in various ways by scholars (B. Menu 1977), but seems to indicate that this God's Wife also gained control over the position of Second Prophet of the Amun cult. The text indicates the God's Wife had considerable financial and political support from the king and was promised the continuation of her religious office and the right to pass it on to future royal women. Chapels built in the reign of Amenhotep I, her son, contained scenes on their walls depicting Ahmose-Nefertari and the king performing the ritual for Amun.

After Ahmose Nefertari, the title of God's Wife of Amun was passed to her daughter Meritamun, and next to her grand-daughter, the princess Hatshepsut who was God's Wife during her early career as wife of the pharaoh Thutmose II. Some scholars think that this religious role for the queen may have been negated later in the dynasty when kings who followed Hatshepsut (the female pharaoh who began her career as a God's Wife) may have feared that another strong woman could use the office to gain power and influence and become a political threat. When Hatshepsut became regent for Thutmose III and a *defacto* pharaoh, her daughter, Neferure, assumed the cultic role. The princess is portrayed at Karnak, on the walls of her mother's so-called Red Chapel, holding a mace, the insignia of her office. The mother of Hatshepsut's successor is also credited with this rank, and it can be traced through royal women (Troy, 1986, 165-66) until the tangled political morass which ushered in the reign of Amenhotep III. This pharaoh's non-royal wife, Queen Tiye, played the role of Hathor on earth to her husband's sun-god role in his royal jubilee ceremonies, while their daughter, Sit-Amun, was pronounced the Daughter of Amun. (Troy, 1986, 181).

During this time another title appears used by an unidentified royal woman on the wall of Amenhotep's Luxor temple. This is "God's Hand" and has been assumed by G. Robins (1993,153) to relate to the woman's cultic role as a manipulator of the King of the God's sex organ. However, a god is generally understood as the most virile of males, and this is certainly true of Amun-Re who is often portrayed in the state of erection. Thus why he would need help from the hand of any woman is mystifying, and suggests that the title may refer to the active role of carrying out the god's will (as in our "right hand man" expression) of the queen in the realm--an authority that texts of the time definitely indicate Queen Tiye possessed. Indeed other Egyptologists, such as Kitchen recently, translate the title as "Divine Hand," and it is found used by goddesses unrelated to the Amun cult. Later human holders of the title also occupied the highest position in the temple hierarchy so again our explanation may have some credibility.

The monotheistic revolution of Akhenaten and Nefertiti, which did away altogether with support for Amun and the pantheon he headed, did not of course record these roles for the queen and princesses, but Queen Nefertiti was frequently portrayed alone or with her daughter sacrificing at the high altar of her god, thus assuming a high sacerdotal role in the Aten cult, even as she seems to have functioned as a goddess (the earthly manifestation of Tefnut to her husband's Shu).

After this heretical interlude, the traditional pantheon was restored; Amun remained its king; and the title of his God's Wife was resurrected for royal women of the Ramesside dynasties, rather than dying out as Robins contends in her often-quoted article on the title (Cameron and Kuhrt, 1993, 76). The God's Wife title is indeed found on the monuments of the wife of Ramses I (mother of Seti I) (Kitchen, I, 5); on those of the wife of Seti I (Kitchen II, 752:10; Kitchen II, 846:4), and those of the favorite queen of Ramses II, Nefertari (Kitchen II, 851:1 and as pointed out already by Lana Troy (1986, 168-171). Queen Nefertari is shown (in her own tomb's wall paintings) sacrificing at the high altar, just as Nefertiti of the previous dynasty had been so often depicted on more public monuments. This may indicate a role for her similar to the God's

Wife. We cannot know whether Nefertari actually did preside at the altar of an important temple or whether, as some have suggested, she is only depicted doing this in the privacy of her tomb. However, the earlier representations of the women officiants on Hatshepsut's and Nefertiti's monuments makes clear that the queen did have an important religious role to play. Queen Nefertari is recorded as present at the investiture of a new First Prophet at Karnak (Kitchen, III, 282:12), and there remains the possibility that she could, in certain cults, within the inner sanctum of the temple, approach the great deities directly. She is also depicted in the smaller temple at Abu Simbel being crowned by goddesses, and it is clear from a contemporary document (Kitchen, 2000, 186, 9) that this Hathoric temple was as much for honoring her as for the great goddess. Ramses II's daughter Merytamun bore the rather incongruous sounding title of God's Wife of Hathor and also held the position of Chief of the *Heneret* of Amun-Re at Karnak (Kitchen, 1996, 845:10). Although sporadically attested due to the poor preservation of monuments of royal women, the title God's Wife continues into the next dynasty, found with a wife of Ramses III, who was also a Divine Votaress, and for a daughter of Ramses VI.

Like the King of Egypt, the principle queen and mother of the heir to the throne was also considered a divinity, be it Hathor (daughter-wife of the sun-god with whom the king was equated) or as Isis (the personified throne and mother of the god Horus, another divinity equated with the king). Artistic portrayals of queens as the earthly manifestation of the goddess Hathor (in the case of Tiy of the Eighteenth Dynasty and Tuya and Nefertari of the Nineteenth), or the primeval mother-goddess Tefnut (as has been suggested for Nefertiti) are supplemented by frequent portrayals in temples and colossal statuary of the royal wives and daughters of the New Kingdom, in comparison to the royal sons who almost never appear on existing monuments. This has led some (beginning with Troy, 1986) to suggest that divine kingship was really an androgynous, or bi-polar concept dependent on both the male and female element that kept the cosmos functioning properly. However, the much greater prominence given to the king on the monuments and in the burial place casts some doubt on this theory. On the other hand, it must

be significant that the queen and princesses are usually present (if not prominent) on a large number of pharaonic monuments, and the queen and her fecundity (as wife and mother of the most important person on earth, i.e. pharaoh) gave her a major role to play in the responsibility for the continual well-being of the nation and the divine order of the universe. The mother of king Ramses II, was celebrated with a towering but elegant statue in her mortuary cult chapel at her son's temple on the West Bank at Thebes (B. Lesko, 1998, 158) and his daughter, Merytamun, was depicted in an even more colossal statue at the temple of Min and Isis in Akhmim (Hawass, 2000, 189). That Min was a fertility god gives impetus to the theory that the princess played an important role as an intercessor with the divine sphere to ensure the fertility of the Nile valley and the prosperity of the country. Interestingly, the mummy of a young daughter of Ramses II was actually found at Akhmim (Llagostera, 1998, 691-96), which suggests that some royal women were resident at this temple of a god, important for the very survival of the land. Recently a German-Egyptian expedition discovered another colossal statue of a queen of Ramses II at Tel Basta in the Delta which suggests again that royal women played leadership roles at major temples. There also remains a record of a sister of Ramses II who served as Chief of the *Heneret* of the sun god, Pre (Kitchen, 2000, 270).

The queens of the Twentieth Dynasty, judging from wall scenes in the temple of Ramses III at Medinet Habu on the West Bank at Luxor, continued to take part in great national religious events, such as the Feast of Min, in which, by her presence, she probably represented the female element inherent in the sustenance and creation of life. Women of the royal harem of that reign are depicted wearing head dresses associated with performers in some cults, such as Hathor's, and it would not be surprising if this is a continuance of a long tradition, seen already in the Eleventh Dynasty temple at Deir el-Bahri, of the pharaoh's women being priestesses for that deity, the goddess of love and one of the divine mothers of the pharaoh. Documentation is far from adequate. Too many tombs and temples of this period are in ruins or remain unexcavated at present to allow adequate reconstruction of the religious roles of royal women at the end of the New Kingdom. The fact, however, that a wife of

Ramses III held the position of Divine Votaress suggests her presence at Thebes and her identity with the "Noble Lady" referred to in some Late Ramesside letters.

Private Cults and Personal Religion

The Egyptians felt they could turn to their gods and goddesses for help and support through the vicissitudes of life. For instance, because she was the chief patroness of sexuality and fertility, the goddess Hathor was appealed to by both men and women for help with finding a mate or starting a family. As may be seen from the exhaustive study by G. Pinch (1993), the environs of Hathor temples reveal a wide range of votive materials--ranging from pottery figurines of mothers suckling babes to wooden phalli. Pinch has found a large percentage of votive textiles dedicated by women worshipers of Hathor, while men dedicated small stelae (Pinch, 1993, 96 and 93). Obviously the handicrafts and buying power were influenced by the sex of the devout. Love songs of the New Kingdom feature youths crediting Hathor with their romances; and a statue addressed the women of Thebes thus:

"Tell your requests to the Cow of Gold, to the Lady of Happiness...may she give us excellent children, happiness, and a good husbands...If cakes are placed before her, she will not be angry" (B. Lesko, 1999, 114).

Within private households, the mother of the family maintained the cult of the household gods (usually those who, like the pregnant hippo Taweret and the grotesque dancing dwarf Bes, were beneficial to her fertility and children). She is also depicted as the one who sacrificed before the image of the family's ancestor or ancestress on the household's altar. Deceased relatives were not deemed gone forever or disinterested in their living family members, but were looked upon as possible saviors, possible intercessors with deities. Some simple busts, of indistinct gender, have survived from settlement sites, and one drawing exists showing a housewife burning incense and pouring an oblation before an ancestor bust within her home (Friedman, 1994, 109). Letters left at the tomb of deceased relatives by persons troubled with crises in

their lives show that the Egyptians believed the dead could either be responsible for afflicting the living or might effectively solve their problems. Again, the collection of letters published by Wente (1990) referred to previously contains examples of widows appealing to dead husbands to look after the welfare of their children in inheritance disputes and the like, but husbands also appealed to their deceased wives to use their influence in the Beyond on their family's behalf.

The concern for fertility, the protection of women in child birth, and the health of the newborn are all reflected by wall paintings and furniture decorations depicting the supernatural beings considered as protective and helpful on the domestic scene. Of course amulets were worn by people of both sexes and all ages to ward off malevolent forces. Oracular decrees issued by temples were worn by women for their "guarantees" of safe delivery and healthy babies. A female purification ritual accompanied by celebrations seems to have followed a period of fourteen days following giving birth.

In a society where oral tradition handed down the complicated myths for which virtually no early manuscripts have been found, women must have helped preserve and pass along to the younger generation religious teachings and lore. One didactic text from Deir el-Medina mentions passing on from a father to both sons and daughters the wisdom of experience and the advice on how to conduct oneself in order to live a successful life. Thus young women were believed capable of learning and capable of participating in the life outside the home. Indeed, such has been the message of numerous wall scenes as well as written documents depicting women in labor and commercial settings (Fischer, 2000,19-32; Lesko, 1996, 30-35).

Female entertainers are often depicted in the tomb paintings, and, in an age as sophisticated and cosmopolitan as the New Kingdom, female divines were active in village life (Borghouts, 1982, 24-27). At the very least, the special powers that these women exhibited, whether clairvoyant or not, were sought out and respected by their fellow citizens. Such women were no doubt at work in much earlier times as well, awing their

neighbors with their abilities to heal and cure, to find missing objects, to predict the future course of events. Such "wise women" still exist in the Middle East and elsewhere. In Lebanon's hill country, people in recent times came from miles around, by donkey and by Mercedes, to beg the help of a wise woman who charged them nothing but did receive gifts if her advice and prophecies turned out to be on the mark (personal communication, Prof. Wm. A. Ward of the American University of Beirut) The ancient village's wise women who may have played the role of a shaman--interpreting phenomena, finding lost articles, explaining and solving problems-- were seen as practicing "white magic" and were not viewed as malignant witches by the community, but as helpers in coping with the challenges of life. However, the fact that such women are not specifically named in contemporary source may indicate that they were held in some awe or fear.

The cult temple at Thebes of the goddess Mut, consort of Amun-Re, had an oracle, and it is likely that any voiced proclamations would have come from a female voice. The same can be imagined for the oracle of the deified queen Nefertari (Wente, 1990, #211) who, in one record we have, was approached by a woman for an explanation of a puzzling dream. Unfortunately no more details that can allow us to identify oracles at this time.

Lastly, the late New Kingdom produced a new genre of painting, the small wooden votive stela on which are depicted an individual standing directly before a great deity in adoration. These were made for tombs and many of these stelae portray women worshippers, indeed I have seen more representing women than men in the extant examples in museums around the world. Possibly women were the more consistently devout members of society, which is not unusual. They also, of course, had their own female *ushebtis* (mummiform figurines of servant helpers placed with a burial) when it came time to be buried. The immediacy between worshiper and deity is commonly seen in the art of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Dynasties. Many stone stelae portray couples and often entire families of three generations in the company of the greatest gods and this is seen on decorated tomb walls of the period as well no matter the social

status of the deceased. These reflect what has been observed in texts surviving from this post-Amarna period: a heightening of piety among the common people and a strong belief that the gods watched over humanity and could punish as well as forgive "sins." While the living were thus portrayed as supplicants before the gods, once mummified (a process that was expensive and not affordable by all, by any means) the deceased was viewed as divine, having undergone methodical magical rituals (Kitchen, 2000, 270). This divinity was shared by both women and men.

New Cultic Roles for Women in the First Millennium

Following the glorious Empire which saw Egypt as a powerful, highly centralized state-- the wealthiest and most influential in the Mediterranean World and the Near East--the Third Intermediate Period was a time of withdrawal from foreign domination, political fragmentation, and modest attainments. It, however, gives us a new title, which may actually represent again an especially elite group of sacred singers: "Singers in the Interior of the Temple of Amun" (Teeter in Teeter & Larson, 2000, 405). Relatives of kings were among their numbers, and there is evidence of both daughters and mothers serving together. Such spanning of generations was found in the Old Kingdom among the Hathoric priesthood and also graphically is shown on tomb walls of following periods where professional mourning women of different generations are portrayed in groups.

Numerous stelae of women bearing the religious title of "chantress" were found together in one part of the great national shrine and necropolis of Abydos, sacred to the god of the dead Osiris. Of twenty-three of these Late Period stelae, only five included a husband's figure and name, whereas eighteen belonged to women alone, most of whom were Chantresses of Osiris (Lesko, 1991, 8-9). Whether these stelae indicate celibate religious women attached to the temples of Abydos or only that some women chose to be buried or memorialized apart from their families due to their religious activities is anyone's guess.

Similarly, the evidence is not pervasive and is inconclusive for most God's Wives of Amun at Karnak. Clearly the royal women of the previous New Kingdom who held this title were married to the earthly manifestation of Amun- Re (pharaoh) and thus could not be considered in any way inappropriately married, but the same cannot be said necessarily for the later Gods Wives who were either daughters or sisters of rulers, but not their queens. When at the end of Egypt's empire period the country split politically between north and south with the First Prophet of Amun-Re at Karnak controlling the south and maintaining the numerous great temples of the region, his daughters then filled the role of God's Wife of Amun, and his wife became the Prophetess of Mut, the goddess who was Amun's consort. Whether this office had ever previously been filled by women is not known due to scarcity of records.

By the Twenty-third Dynasty, Egypt was under Libyan rule and the fourth king of that dynasty, Osorkon III (777-749 B.C.E.) consecrated his own daughter as a God's Wife who would live in Thebes and give all her attention to the important cult. In this way the king, whose residence was in the north of the country, could control better the Theban area. He used his daughter as his representative there politically as well as one who would control the wealth and authority vested in the Amun priesthood. This priestess was Shepenwepet I who received all the estates and property formerly possessed by the High Priest. The God's Wife was shown on the monuments with many accretements of royal status: her names appeared in royal cartouches; she had a prenomen just like a king; and, as formerly the king was shown, she is portrayed performing the rites of consecrating offerings and presenting *Maat* to the gods (Teeter, 1997, 113-115). She also enjoyed the queenly title of Mistress of the Two Lands. Of course these sacred women had their own administrative staffs and headed the hierarchy of what was probably the world's largest and wealthiest temple establishment. In religious matters this woman was very like a female pope and would have ruled by the word of Amun, probably by manipulating his oracle.

The Gods Wife ensured her succession by adopting a successor, and this younger woman first carried the old title of Divine Votaress. As these

women enjoyed long lives that spanned kingly reigns, they were a source of moral and political stability and leadership in the southern half of the country. There has been a lot of discussion and disagreement in Egyptology concerning the alleged celibacy of such highly placed religious women (Lesko, 1989 and Teeter in Teeter & Larson, 1999). Latest investigations by M. Ayad for her Brown University doctoral dissertation (Ayad, 2002) have convinced her of the political necessity for the Gods Wife's celibacy, as it would have prevented her from producing her own dynasty which might have rivaled the political power of the king in the north. The act of adoption itself is no proof of celibacy, as it may well pertain to the transfer of rank and property. However, if a God's Wife was married, it would seem appropriate for her own daughter to gain her office, as in ancient Egypt passing on the office of parent to child was the desirable norm. Yet, as Ayad points out, the king would not have wanted a rival dynasty in the South, and thus the *adoption* of his own daughter at Karnak was politically expedient as was the celibacy of these women.

The Libyan period coincides with changes in religious beliefs pertaining to the after-life. Now the deceased, whether woman or man, was placed at the center of the universe and ordinary people (at least those who could afford the brilliantly decorated coffins of the Third Intermediate Period which demonstrate this) were identified as the creator god and the source of their own resurrection. Thus a further "democratization" of the hereafter seems to have occurred in the wake of the subsiding of the political and religious importance of the king and pertained to both women and men.

The Nubian invasion in 720 B.C. wrested Egypt away from the Libyans. These people from south of Egypt's border were also devoted to the cult of Amun (some think Amun was native to their land) and they did not oust the Libyan God's Wife but instead presented her with a candidate for her successor. This was one way of controlling Upper Egypt for years to come, as the political importance of the office was not lost upon the invaders. By this time the old office of First Prophet of Amun, the highest priestly position, is believed to have been eliminated which

further unlines the importance of the female at the head of the temple's hierarchy. The first Nubian God's Wife was Amenirdis, the sister of the general who had led the successful invasion. She in turn adopted as her successor his daughter, to be known as Shepenwepet II. The large pyloned funerary chapels of this line of women may be seen today at Medinet Habu on the west bank at Luxor

However, the Nubian interlude did not last long. The Assyrian invasions occurred and took their toll in 671 and 663 B.C. Thebes was ransacked and the treasures of Karnak, including solid gold obelisks, were carried away to Asia. Nonetheless, the Assyrian empire was over-extended, and a local prince of Sais in the Egyptian Delta gradually increased his political sway and diplomatic and economic ties to the point where he was strong enough to control the entire land by 656 B.C. thus founding a new Twenty-sixth Dynasty. His daughter, the princess Nitiquit (Nitocris) was sent to Thebes from the Delta with a flotilla of boats containing much "dowry." In this way, again, Upper Egypt was firmly affixed to the government in the north. However, God's Wife Nitiquit outlived her father and the administrators he had appointed for her. During her long reign of over 50 years she came to administer through men of her own choosing, without even adopting a successor in order to keep the kings in the north from having influence in the south. Finally in 594 B.C., and in her eighties, Nitiquit adopted her great niece Ankhnesneferibre, daughter of Psamtik (Psammetichus II), soon after he came to the throne of Egypt.

This young woman was first given the resurrected title of First Prophet or High Priest of Amun and is thus the only woman known to have held this high clerical office. It would seem that Nitiquit engineered this move for her adopted successor in order to preserve the power of women at Karnak. During the 130 years of these two women's reigns their power definitely rivaled the kings of their time, at least in Upper Egypt, and they were portrayed in art holding the crook and flail scepters of the kingdom. The Persian invasion put an end to this Egyptian dynasty of religious women pontiffs. The Persian's military might did not cause

them to feel the need to control a sacerdotal office in Upper Egypt. They merely abolished it.

However, the title of Gods Wife was not forgotten. The records are not complete enough to give us a detailed history of its use, but it was recalled under the famous Cleopatra VII when "Wife of Ptah" is a title recorded for the wife of the High Priest of Ptah at Memphis. The third Cleopatra of the Ptolemaic line ruled the country and served as the priest for the cult of Alexander the Great (Chauveau, 2000, 17). The earlier queens in this Ptolemaic Dynasty of Cleopatra (of Macedonian origin) were often deified and these deified queens had female priestesses for their cults, women who were themselves daughters of leading families (B. Lesko, 1999, 252-254). However these religious women were not celibate and probably performed their duties on a part-time basis. There exists a coffin of one Imhotep, a high priest of Hathor of Cusae dating from the Ptolamaic period, that mentions his parents as having both served as "high priest" of this goddess, who remained important, judging from the grand temple built by the Ptolemaic rulers for her at Dendera (Blackman, 1921, 10). Once the Romans seized Egypt there was even a Prophetess of Caesar. The very popular cult of the Egyptian goddess Isis, which spread far and wide throughout the Roman world, is known to have had both female and male priestly personnel in Europe, as it probably did in Egypt where the goddess's great temples still stand.

Herodotus called Egypt the most religious of nations, and it is clear from texts and artistic monuments that both men and women could take active parts in demonstrating their piety, whether by making regular offerings to favorite deities, dedicating monuments, or even more actively by playing sacred roles inside the houses of the gods. From all periods come testimonies to the involvement of women of various ranks in the religious life of their country. At certain times it was women who were turned to for special influence with the gods and for excersing, through religious office, a stabilizing force in politically uncertain times. There is no *religious* basis for discounting women's status in ancient Egyptian society. The Egyptian woman did not stand back while a male mediated between her and the deity, as is seen in later monotheistic religions.

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